

The Light in the Clearing

A Tale of the North Country in the Time of Silas Wright

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CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

He had a priceless and unusual talent for avoiding school-reader English and the arts of declamation and for preparing a difficult subject to enter the average brain. The underlying secret of his power was soon apparent to me. He stood always for that great thing in America which, since then, Whitman has called "the divine aggregate," and seeing clearly how every measure would be likely to affect its welfare, he followed the compass. It had led him to a height of power above all others and was to lead him unto the loneliest summit of accomplishment in American history.

Not much in my term of service there is important to this little task of mine. I did my work well, if I may believe the senator, and grew familiar with the gentle and ungente arts of the politician.

One great fact grew in magnitude and sullen portent as the months passed: the gigantic slave-holding interests of the South viewed with growing alarm the spread of abolition sentiment. Subtly, quietly and naturally they were feeling for the means to defend and increase their power. Straws were coming to the surface in that session which betrayed this deep undercurrent of purpose. We felt it and the senator was worried. I knew, but held his peace. He knew how to keep his opinions until the hour had struck that summoned them to service. The senator never played with his lance. By and by Spencer openly sounded the note of conflict.

The most welcome year of my life dawned on the first of January, 1844. I remember that I arose before daylight that morning and dressed and went out on the street to welcome it.

I had less than six months to wait for that day appointed by Sally. I had no doubt that she would be true to me. I had had my days of fear and depression come back in good time.

Oh, yes, indeed, Washington was a fair of beauty and gallantry those days. I saw it all. I have spent many years in the capital, and I tell you the girls of that time had manners and knew how to wear their clothes, but again the magic of old memories kept my lady on her throne. There was one of them—just one of those others who, I sometimes thought, was almost as graceful and charming and noble-hearted as Sally, and she liked me, I know, but the ideal of my youth glowed in the light of the early morning, so to speak, and was brighter than all others. Above all, I had given my word to Sally, and—well, you know, the old-time Yankee of good stock was fairly steadfast, whatever else may be said of him—often a little too steadfast, as were Ben Grimshaw and Squire Fullerton.

The senator and I went calling that New Year's day. We saw all the great people and some of them were more cheerful than they had a right to be. It was a weakness of the time. I shall not go into details for fear of wandering too far from my main road. Let me step aside a moment to say, however, that there were two clouds in the sky of the Washington society of those days. One was strong drink and the other was the crude, rough-coated, aggressive democrat from the frontiers of the West. These latter were often seen in the holiday regalia of farm or village at fashionable functions. Some of them changed slowly, and by and by reached the stage of white linen and diamond breastpins and waistcoats of figured silk. It must be said, however, that their motives were always above their taste.

The winter wore away slowly in hard work. Mr. Van Buren came down to see the senator one day from his country seat on the Hudson. The ex-president had been solicited to accept the nomination again. I know that Senator Wright strongly favored the plan but feared that the South would defeat him in convention, it being well known that Van Buren was opposed to the annexation of Texas. However, he advised his friend to make a fight for the nomination and this the latter resolved to do. Thenceforward until middle May I gave my time largely to the inditing of letters for the senator in Van Buren's behalf.

The time appointed for the convention in Baltimore drew near. One day the senator received an intimation that he would be put in nomination if Van Buren failed. Immediately he wrote to Judge Fine of Ogdensburg, chairman of the delegation from the northern district of New York, forbidding such use of his name on the ground that his acquiescence would involve disloyalty to his friend the ex-president.

He gave me leave to go to the convention on my way home to meet Sally. I had confided to Mrs. Wright the details of my little love affair—I had to

—and she had shown a tender, sympathetic interest in the story.

The senator had said to me one day, with a gentle smile:

"Bart, you have business in Canton, I believe, with which trifling matters like the choice of a president and the Mexican question cannot be permitted to interfere. You must take time to spend a day or two at the convention in Baltimore on your way. . . . Report to our friend Fine, who will look after your comfort there. The experience ought to be useful to a young man who, I hope, will have work to do in future conventions."

I took the stage to Baltimore next day—the twenty-sixth of May. The convention thrilled me—the flags, the great crowd, the bands, the songs, the speeches, the cheering—I see and hear it all in my talk. The uproar lasted for twenty minutes when Van Buren's name was put in nomination.

Then the undercurrent! The South was against him as Wright had foreseen. The deep current of its power had undermined certain of the northern and western delegations. Ostensibly for Van Buren and stubbornly casting their ballots for him, they had voted for the two-thirds rule, which had accomplished his defeat before the balloting began. It continued for two days without a choice. The enemy stood firm. After adjournment that evening many of the Van Buren delegates were summoned to a conference. I attended it with Judge Fine.

The ex-president had withdrawn and requested his friends in the convention to vote for Silas Wright. My emotions can be more readily imagined than described when I heard the shouts of enthusiasm which greeted my friend's name. Tears began to roll down my cheeks. Judge Fine lifted his hand. When order was at last restored he began:

"Gentlemen, as a friend of the learned senator and as a resident of the county which is the proud possessor of his home, your enthusiasm has a welcome sound to me; but I happen to know that Senator Wright will not allow his name to go before the convention."

He read the letter of which I knew. Mr. Benjamin F. Butler then said: "When that letter was written Senator Wright was not aware that Mr. Van Buren's nomination could not be accomplished, nor was he aware that his own nomination would be the almost unanimous wish of this convention. I have talked with the leading delegates from Missouri and Virginia today. They say that he can be nominated by acclamation. Is it possible that he—a strong party man—can resist this unanimous call of the party with whose help he has won immortal fame? No, it is not so. It cannot be so. We must dispatch a messenger to him by horse at once who shall take to him from his friend Judge Fine a message of withdrawal and thus deliver the convention."

The suggestion was unanimously approved and within an hour, mounted on one of the best horses in Maryland—so his groom informed me—I was on my way to Washington with the message of Judge Fine in my pocket. Yes, I had two days to spare on my schedule of travel and reckoned that, by returning to Baltimore next day I should reach Canton in good time.

It was the kind of thing that only a lithe, supple, strong-hearted lad such as I was in the days of my youth, could relish—speeding over a dark road by the light of the stars and a half-moon, with a horse that loved to kick up a wind. My brain was in a fever, for the notion had come to me that I was making history.

The lure of fame and high place hurried me on. With the senator in the presidential chair I should be well started in the highway of great success. Then Mr. H. Dunkelberg might think me better than the legacy of Benjamin Grimshaw. A relay awaited me twenty-three miles down the road.

Well, I reached Washington very sore, but otherwise in good form, soon after daybreak. I was trembling with excitement when I put my horse in the stable and rang the bell at our door. It seemed to me that I was crossing the divide between big and little things. A few steps more and I should be looking down into the great valley of the future. Yet, now that I was there, I began to lose confidence.

The butler opened the door. Yes, the senator was up and had just returned from a walk and was in his study. I found him there.

"Well, Bart, how does this happen?" he asked.

"It's important business," I said, as I presented the letter.

Something in his look and manner as he calmly adjusted his glasses and read the letter of Judge Fine brought the blood to my face. It seemed to puncture my balloon, so to speak, and I was falling toward the earth and so swiftly my head swam. He laid the letter on his desk and, without looking up and as coolly as if he were asking for the change of a dollar, queried:

"Well, Bart, what do you think we had better do about it?"

"I—I was hoping—you—you would take it," I stammered.

"That's because the excitement of the convention is on you," he answered. "Let us look at the compass. They have refused to nominate Mr. Van Buren because he is opposed to the annexation of Texas. On that subject the will of the convention is now clear. It is possible that they would nominate me. We don't know about that, we never shall know. If they did, and I accepted, what would be expected of me is also clear. They would expect me to abandon my principles and that course of conduct which I conceive to be best for the

country. Therefore I should have to accept it under false pretenses and take their yoke upon me. Would you think the needle pointed that way?"

"No," I answered.

Immediately he turned to his desk and wrote the telegram which fixed his place in history. It said no.

Into the lives of few men has such a moment fallen. I looked at him with a feeling of awe. What sublime calmness and serenity was in his face! As if it were a mere detail in the work of the day, and without a moment's faltering, he had declined a crown, for he would surely have been nominated and elected. He rose and stood looking out of the open window. Always I think of him standing there with the morning sunlight falling upon his face and shoulders. He had observed my emotion and I think it had touched him a little. There was a moment of silence. A curious illusion came to me then, for it seemed as if I heard the sound of distant music. Looking thoughtfully out of the window he asked:

"Bart, do you know when our first fathers turned out of the trail of the beast and found the long road of humanity? I think it was when they discovered the compass in their hearts."

So now at last we have come to that high and lonely place, where we may look back upon the toilsome, adventurous way we have traveled with the aid of the candle and the compass. Now let us stop a moment to rest and to think. How sweet the air is here! The night is falling. I see the stars in the sky.

Just below me is the valley of Eternal silence. You will understand my haste now. I have sought only to do justice to my friend and to give my country a name, long neglected, but equal in glory to those of Washington and Lincoln.

Come, let us take one last look together down the road we have traveled.



I Took the Stage to Baltimore Next Day.

eled, now dim in the evening shadows. Scattered along it are the little houses of the poor of which I have written. See the lights in the windows—the lights that are shining into the souls of the young—the eager, open, expectant, welcoming souls of the young—and the light carries many things, but best of all a respect for the old, unchanging way of the compass. After all that is the end and aim of the whole matter—believe me.

My life has lengthened into these days when most of our tasks are accomplished by machinery. We try to make men by the thousand, in vast educational machines, and no longer by the one as of old. It was the loving, forgiving, forbearing, patient, ceaseless toil of mother and father on the tender soil of childhood which quickened that inextinguishable sense of responsibility to God and man in these people whom I now leave to the judgment of my countrymen.

I have lived to see the ancient plan of kingcraft, for self-protection, coming back into the world. It demands that the will and conscience of every individual shall be regulated and controlled by some concealed prince, backed by an army. It cannot fail, I foresee, to accomplish such devastation in the human spirit as shall imperil the dearest possession of man.

If one is to follow the compass he can have but one king—his God.

I am near the end. I rode back to Baltimore that forenoon. They had nominated Mr. Polk of Tennessee for president and Silas Wright for vice president, the latter by acclamation. I knew that Wright would decline the honor, as he did.

I hurried northward to keep my appointment with Sally. The boats were slowed by fog. At Albany I was a day behind my schedule. I should have only an hour's leeway if the boats on the upper lakes and the stage from Plattsburg were on time. I feared to trust them. So I caught the west-bound train and reached Utica three hours late. There I bought a good horse and his saddle and bridle and hurried up the north road. When he was near spent I traded him for a well-knit Morgan mare up in the little village of Sandy Creek. Oh, I knew a good horse as well as the next man and a better one than she I never owned—never. I was back in my saddle at six in the afternoon and stopped for feed and an hour's rest at nine and rode on through the night. I reached the hamlet of Richville soon after daybreak and put out for a rest of two

hours. I could take it easy then. At seven o'clock the mare and I started again, well fed and eager to go on.

It was a summer morning that shortened the road—even that of the young lover. Its air was sweet with the breath of the meadows. The daisies and the clover and the cornflowers and the wild roses seemed to be waving a welcome to me, and the thorn trees—shapely ornaments of my native hills—were in blossom. A cloud of pigeons swept across the blue deep above my head. The great choir of the fields sang to me—bobolinks, song-sparrows, meadowlarks, bluebirds, warblers, wrens, and far away in the edge of a spruce thicket I heard the flute of the white-throated sparrow.

I bathed at a brook in the woods and put on a clean silk shirt and tie out of my saddlebags. I rode slowly then to the edge of the village of Canton and turned at the bridge and took the river road, although I had time to spare. How my heart was beating as I neared the familiar scene! The river slowed its pace there, like a discerning traveler, to enjoy the beauty of its shores. Smooth and silent was the water and in it were the blue of the sky and the feathery shadow-spires of cedar and tamarack and the reflected blossoms of iris and meadow rue. It was a lovely scene.

There was the pine, but where was my lady? I dismounted and tied my mare and looked at my watch. It lacked twenty minutes to eleven. She would come—I had no doubt of it. I washed my hands and face and neck in the cool water. Suddenly I heard a voice I knew singing: "Barney Leave the Girls Alone." I turned and saw—your mother, my son. (These last lines were dictated to his son.) She was in the stern of a birch canoe, all dressed in white with roses in her hair. I raised my hat and she threw a kiss at me. Old Kate sat in the bow waving her handkerchief. They stopped and Sally asked in a tone of playful seriousness:

"Young man, why have you come here?"

"To get you," I answered.

"What do you want of me?" She was looking at her face in the water.

"I want to marry you," I answered bravely.

"Then you may help me ashore if you please. I am in my best, white slippers and you are to be very careful."

Beautiful! She was the spirit of the fields of June then and always.

I helped her ashore and held her in my arms and, you know, the lips have a way of speaking then in the old, convincing, final argument of love. They left no doubt in our hearts, my son.

"When do you wish to marry me?" she whispered.

"As soon as possible, but my pay is only sixty dollars a month now."

"We shall make it do," she answered. "Your aunt and uncle and the Hackets and the minister and a number of our friends are coming in a fleet of boats."

"We are prepared either for a picnic or a wedding," was the whisper of Kate.

"Let's make it both," I proposed to Sally.

"Surely there couldn't be a better place than here under the big pine—it's so smooth and soft and shady," said she.

"Nor could there be a better day or better company," I urged, for I was not sure that she would agree.

The boats came along. Sally and I waved a welcome from the bank and she merrily proclaimed:

"It's to be a wedding."

Then a cheer from the boats, in which I joined.

I shall never forget how, when the company had landed and the greetings were over, Uncle Peabody approached your mother and said:

"Say, Sally, I'm goin' to plant a kiss on both o' them red cheeks o' yours, an' do it deliberate, too."

He did it and so did Aunt Deel and old Kate, and I think that, next to your mother and me, they were the happiest people at the wedding.

There is a lonely grave up in the hills—that of the stranger who died long ago on Rattleroad. One day I found old Kate sitting beside it and on a stone lately erected there was the name, Enoch Rone.

"It is very sorrowful," she whispered. "He was trying to find me when he died."

We walked on in silence while I recalled the circumstances. How strange that those tales of blood and lawless daring which Kate had given to Amos Grimshaw had led to the slaying of her own son! Yet, so it happened, and the old wives will tell you the story up there in the hills.

The play ends just as the night is falling with Kate and me entering the little home, so familiar now, where she lives and is ever welcome with Aunt Deel and Uncle Peabody. The latter meets us at the door and is saying in a cheerful voice:

"Come in to supper, you rovers. How solemn ye look! Say, if you expect Sally and me to do all the laughing here you're mistaken. There's a lot of it to be done right now, an' it's time you jined in. We ain't done nothin' but laugh since we got up, an' we're in need o' help. What's the matter, Kate? Look up at the light in God's window. How bright it shines tonight! When I feel bad I always look at the stars."

(THE END.)

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KEPT RIGHT

Envy. Nineteen-year-old Henry has just come home from his first year in an eastern college. His sixteen-year-old brother Bill looks on many changes in Henry's bit of mischief. The other day Henry went into the bathroom to trim the edges of that imitation of a mustache and Bill happened in while the operation was in progress. For a few minutes he watched his brother in silence and then he called to his mother:

"Oh, mother, be sure to have Jennie sweep up the bathroom immediately. Henry is trimming his beard and I don't want the little kids to get their feet all cut up!"—Indianapolis News.

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Pinned Down.

Lawyer—And what was the defendant doing meanwhile?

Witness—He was telling me a funny story.

Lawyer—Remember, sir, that you are under oath.

Witness—Well, anyway, he was telling me a story.

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Pals.

"Yes, I'm the former kaiser." "Shake! I'm the man who started the flu."—Cartoons Magazine.

Wise Man.

"My barber is bitter against bolshevism."

"Wise man. It would ruin his biz."

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